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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the need for and the structure of a socialization program designed to provide a social environment for five deaf adults with developmental disabilities residing in two different group homes. The program was developed to address the isolation experienced by such adults living in a community with others who do not use sign language. The program's focus was on fostering socialization among group members and strengthening participants' poor sign language skills. The program involved weekly group sessions in which five new signs were introduced and practiced in a social context, often a group game. Other activities included community dinners and outings. Attendance by group home staff members at some sessions led to staff gaining some sign language skill. An unsuccessful effort to teach the residents signed English led to adoption and use of American Sign Language. The program has been very successful, with enthusiastic involvement by participants. Staff at the group homes and the sheltered workshop where the residents work also report more positive attitudes and fewer discipline problems. (DB)

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A SOCIALIZATION PROGRAM FOR DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED DEAF ADULTS

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the need for and the structure of a socialization program designed to provide a social environment for developmentally disabled deaf adults. The program was started to address the isolation experienced by deaf adults who are developmentally disabled and live in a community with others who do not use sign language. The purpose of the group treatment was to foster socialization among the group members and to strengthen sign language skills. The various social activities utilized with the group are described. Factors which contribute to the success of the program are identified. Rationale for the use of ASL is included. This article demonstrates how the increased opportunity for socialization through sign language development enhances the overall quality of life for the participants.

Adults who reside in institutions for the developmentally disabled are at great risk of being isolated from their surrounding community. During the past ten years in the USA this

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situation has improved significantly by the closing of most large residential facilities for the developmentally disabled population and returning these residents to group homes located in their home counties. Despite this, however, isolation is still a problem. Most of these people work in sheltered workshops and many of their daily needs such as shopping are done by their house manager. Much of their social interaction, therefore, is with other residents of the group home. Contact with their family members is usually sporadic. This problem is particularly acute for developmentally disabled deaf adults living in group homes who use sign language as their primary means of communication.

To address this need a socialization program was started with five developmentally disabled deaf adults who reside in two different group homes for the developmentally disabled and use sign language as their primary means of communication. Three of the residents live in one group home which will be referred to as Park and the other two live in a different home which will be referred to as Kenwood. Both homes have three other residents each, none of whom can communicate using sign language. In the past attempts have been made to reassign the residents and place all the deaf individuals in the same home. This is, however, not permissible in the USA because it is considered discriminatory to make placements based on a disabling condition.

The program began five years ago when Hearing Speech and Language Services, Inc. a private practice agency in speech

pathology and audiology operating in the Cincinnati, Ohio area was asked to do speech and hearing evaluations on all of the residents of both group homes. At that time the speech-language pathologist (SLP) became keenly aware of the isolation of the five deaf individuals. Although a few of the case workers knew minimal signs most communication was accomplished by home-sign or gestures. None of the hearing residents communicated with the deaf residents. Social interaction within the home was extremely limited for the deaf residents and social activities outside the home were also severely limited because interpreters were seldom available. In consultation with the group home manager a program was initiated to foster the use of conventional signs among the residents and staff and to create a more social atmosphere for the deaf residents.

The program began by setting up weekly group sessions where the five deaf residents were brought together and taught both pragmatic and sign language skills. All of the residents arrived home from the sheltered work shop at 3:30 and the weekly sessions were scheduled for 4 o'clock at the Park group home. Cooperation by the group home management was required to set the program up because the two residents from Kenwood needed to be transported to Park home for the weekly sessions. This did not become a problem because the group home management is very concerned about meeting the social needs of all the residents.

Due to their previous long term isolation none of the five deaf residents had either well developed social or sign language skills. The focus of the program then became one of both enhancing signing abilities as well as pragmatic abilities. Each week five new signs were introduced and practiced in a social context such as games, cooking, or craft activities.

The weekly sessions begin by each member signing "Hello" and "how are you?" This activity was directed at another member of the group and that person's sign name was used. Each group member was then given an opportunity to tell something about what he/she did during the previous day or week. Group members not having signing skills to participate in this part of the session worked individually with the SLP who was coordinating the group or worked with one the university graduate students who assisted the group coordinator. These individual sessions were in addition to the weekly group sessions.

During the weekly group sessions there was ample opportunity for peer support and confidence building. The group members were strongly encouraged to respond positively to other members' stories and successes and were rewarded for their positive responses. This activity in turn lead to more interaction and comradery among the members of the group.

As certain members of the group became more independent and proficient with their signs they were allowed to serve as leaders for the group. Being a leader for the group involved monitoring

turn taking, laying out and organizing the activities for the day, and being responsible for monitoring the signing of the other members. The leader was also responsible to ensure that everyone gets a great deal of praise when appropriate and that the members of the group praised each other for their successes. Several of the group home staff learned sign language and frequently attended the weekly sessions. Their attendance at the weekly session helped them learn the signs that the residents were using and contributed greatly to the success of the program. The program expanded from the weekly sessions to three additional social occasions a week. These social occasions include a game night, a community dinner night, and a weekly outing such as bowling. These three social occasions are in addition to the regularly scheduled weekly group sessions and build on them. The additional social events are the responsibility of the group home staff and are planned in consultation with the SLP from Hearing Speech and Language Services.

The weekly game night occurs at the Park home because it is the house manager there who plans the events. The game night consists of playing a card game or a board game such as bingo or lotto. Usually it is a game that the group has played and enjoyed during one of the weekly group sessions. Prior to the game night the SLP works on the signs needed for the particular game and also the pragmatic skills needed to make the game successful. Some pragmatic skills needed might be taking turns,

dealing cards, asking other members for a particular card, or reacting appropriately when one wins or loses.

The community dinner night may occur at either group home. The residents help in cooking the meal and in setting the table and cleaning up after dinner. They also learn the pragmatic skills needed to be a host or a guest. They learn to plan a meal based on someone else's needs, to arrive on time, to say thank you, and to serve someone a drink or dessert, or similar activities.

Each weekly outing occurs at the discretion of one of the house managers. It involves planning a place to go such as the bowling alley, swimming pool, or fast food restaurant. It also involves arranging for transportation. Frequently these outings are planned in consultation with the SLP who in turn works on the signs needed for that outing during the previous weekly session. The success of the program is due largely to the collaboration between the SLP and the group home staff.

Much of the literature on signing with the developmentally disabled population emphasizes the principal that signed English is the form of signing that works best with this population. Initially attempts were made to teach the five residents signed English. English word order was emphasized and articles and grammatical endings were used. For the most part, however, the five residents were unable to grasp the English component of the signing and resisted using articles and preferred to indicate

tense and plural markers in a more gestural way. For these reasons American Sign Language (ASL) was adopted and is used when ever possible. Because ASL is a natural language communication flowed much more readily when using ASL. The residents are more comfortable with it and comprehend it better than signed English. Since reading and writing are not realistic goals for this population signed English has been eliminated in favor of ASL.

One of the original members of the group is no longer participating and her place has been taken by a new resident from the Kenwood home. Part of the reason the group home agency felt that they could take this new resident into that home was because of the support of the signing group. The group has been incredibly successful. The residents look forward to it each week. It is marked on their calendars and the group home staff reports that they frequently refer to it during the week. The group home staff also report that there is more interaction among the members of the group than there was before the group started. They frequently play games with each other that they learned at the signing group. They interact more during meal time. They express emotions to each other more freely.

Interaction with the staff at the workshop where most of the residents work has been minimal but what has occurred has been positive. The staff reports fewer discipline problems and more interaction among the people who participate in the signing group

as well as some interaction between signing group members and other workers in the workshop who also sign.

Two of the original signing group members have left the workshop setting and have obtained regular employment in the community. One, because of her work schedule, is no longer able to participate in the group but the other still does. The latter works at a fast food facility and often shares stories and pictures about his work with the other residents. The increased opportunity for social expression and sign language development has enhanced the quality of life each of the participants in a variety of ways.